

Folklore: Water Witching

By *Coleen Vansant*
Information Manager, Alabama Forestry Commission

In by-gone days, a water witch was as common as the rolling store.

There were one or more persons in most rural communities who were always called on to witch for underground streams of water before any well was dug. Today, water witches are not as common but there are still those around that can take a simple forked stick or metal rods and find ground water.

Over the centuries water witching (also called dowsing or divining) has been controversial. Some people say a person has the "gift." Others call it the "touch" or the "power." Folklore gives many reasons as to why some people can successfully witch and others cannot. Some folks say that it is passed down on the maternal side of the family, others that it is only passed from the third son to the third son, and some believe that people are bestowed with the gift as a result of being struck by lightning. Centuries ago and even today, many people consider the craft of water witching as a paranormal activity, demonic possession, witchcraft, or just plain nonsense. They put dowsing in the same category with voodoo, séances, and Ouija boards.

History

Witching or dowsing is primarily considered as a search for water. This is how the tradition began centuries ago. However, one can dowse for anything including bodies, ancient artifacts, oil, and gold. Some people even dowse for medical reasons.

Dowsing goes back for thousands of years. There are pictographs in the Tassili-n-Ajjer caves in southeast Libya that show a group of people watching a dowser with a forked stick. These arti-

They were responsible for witching both water and gold.

Dowsing rods were used in 16th century German mines. Colonial settlers later brought witching sticks and rods to America to search for water.

The How and Why

Ask 50 different dowsers how it works and they will give 50 different answers. Some believe it is putting one's self on a spiritual plane with Mother Nature, or that it has something to do

with the magnetic energy of the water crossing with the magnetic energy of the human body. Others say it is a mental communication with the earth. But for those who have the "gift," they don't always have an opinion as to *why* they can, they just know that they can. Many state that it is simply a science that is not clearly understood. According to one unidentified man, "I don't believe in it, but I wouldn't dig a well without it."

The Tools

The greatest thing about witching is that it takes very little equipment and you can make that yourself. You can also purchase dowsing tools commercially. Although there are many things you can

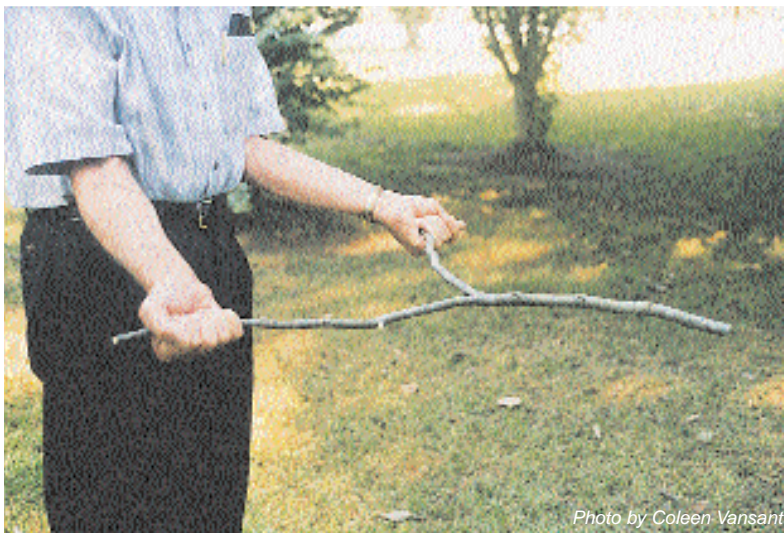


Photo by Coleen Vansant

facts are estimated to be approximately 8,000 years old.

Tradition indicates that the Queen of Sheba included dowsers in her group when she traveled from Africa to the City of Jerusalem to visit King Solomon.

use, I'm going to concentrate on two of the most common.

Angle Rods

Angle rods are just that, two pieces of metal bent at a 45-degree angle. Metal coat hangers are excellent to use or you can use welding rods, copper wire, or any other type of flexible metal. These are considered to be the best to learn on for beginners because it is easier to experience the "feel" or "tug" with the metal rods. (The tug has been described as that of a dog pulling on a leash.)

The rods can be of whatever length is comfortable to the user but a 6-inch section held loosely in the hands with a 12-inch long section that faces forward is a good start. You can use them bare handed or insulate them with something like the tube of an ink pen, drinking straws, or even soft drink bottles. The idea is for them to be free floating. The rods are held in the hands with the longer sections parallel and pointing straight-ahead and level. The person holding the rods walks slowly in a random pattern. When he or she crosses water, whether an underground stream or water pipes, the rods will either cross over each other or move outward.

Soldiers in Vietnam used a single rod, as they carried a rifle in their other hand. They knew they were at the correct location of what they were searching for by the 90-degree movement of the rod. They witched for mines, booby traps, unexploded shells, and even tunnels.

Traditional Wand

More traditional, the witching wand is a forked stick in the shape of a Y. It is made from cutting the fork out of a branch of a tree. Many different species of trees can be used. For some people, fruitwood such as peach, apple, and cherry works best. Others say willow, redbud, mulberry, and birch are also good. The main thing is that the stick be flexible. Most water witches like to cut a new green stick every time they work.

Most diviners hold the stick with their palms upward, elbows close to the sides, gripping the rod until the fork bends out. When they walk over whatever they are searching for, they feel the "pull" or "tug" of the wand as it turns down. A word of caution, however: some people report they've been hit in the head with

the rod when it suddenly pulled upward!

These are two of the more common tools. Others say you can dowse with anything including pendulums, long sticks, pliers, scissors, pencils, rulers, bare hands, and even the human body.

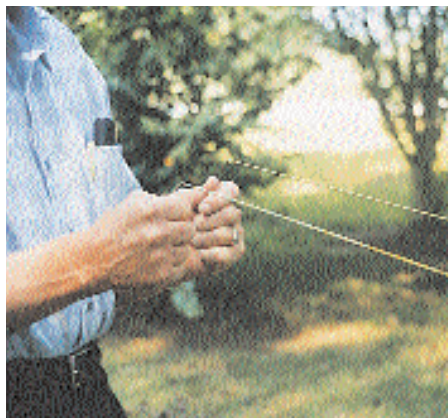
Conclusion

Although not as common today, there are still well witchers out there. Some consider themselves professionals and charge up to \$100.00 to witch a well, while some work on the "no water, no pay" philosophy. For most of the old timers, they just love to show off.

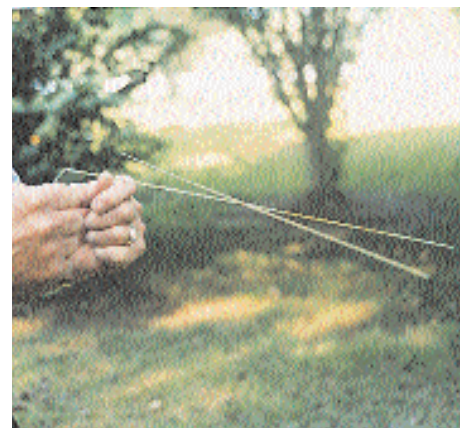
Although folklore says that being able to witch water is a "gift," both the American and British Society of Dowzers believe that it is a craft that can be learned by anyone. Whether a gift or a learned practice, it is something to do at family gatherings as well as a great controversial conservation topic when the talk is going nowhere. ☯



Bobby Vansant of Hanceville demonstrates the forked witching stick as it points to underground water. Some of Bobby's uncles on his mother's side of the family also had the "gift."



Angle rods are the easiest tools to use when witching for water and also the easiest to make. These were made from metal coathangers.



The angle rods will cross each other when they pass over underground water.

Resources:

<http://www.britishdowsers.org>

<http://seattlepi.nwsources.com/lifestyle/dows28.shtml>

<http://www.texas-ec.org/tcp/200water.html>

<http://texnews.com/1998/2000/local/witch0712.html>

Webster, Richard. *Dowsing for Beginners*. St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 2003.

Patton, Darryl. "Water Witching." *Wild Alabama*, vol. 6 issue 2, March/April 1996.